UNIT 14: ROBERT BROWNING: "FRA LIPPO LIPPI"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

14.1 Learning Objectives

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14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" and explore the various themes and ideas working in it
- explore the various themes and ideas in the poem and open up newer avenues for looking at the poem.
- discuss the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" in its nuanced totality

14.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit brings to you a reading of Robert Browning's famous poem "Fra Lippo Lippi". Based on the life of a 15th century Italian painter and a Carmelite friar named Fra Fillipo de Tommaso Lippi, the poem raises various questions on the role of art and artist in the aesthetic and spiritual life of an individual as well as the society. The poem is a dramatic monologue where the poet tries to demarcate the differences in attitude and philosophy of the Medieval and Renaissance artists on art. This poem is a good example of Browning as a humourist in English poetry. This intellectually alluring poem, with references to a number of saints and many other contemporary

painters, makes a unique combination of caustic irony and cutting laughter with the sober discussions on the nature and role of art in the individual and social lives of Renaissance. As you read through this unit, you will understand how under the layer of the ludic (playful), Browning beautifully presents a discussion of some of the most serious debates on the idea of art in this poem.

14.3 READING THE POEM

In the following sections, we will find ourselves discussing, in some details, the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

14.3.1 The Texts of the Poems [Taken from http://www.victorianweb.org]

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
You need not clap your torches to my face.
Zooks, what’s to blame? you think you see a monk!
What, ’tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,
And here you catch me at an alley’s end
Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?
The Carmine’s my cloister: hunt it up,
Do — harry out, if you must show your zeal,
Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,
And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,
, , that’s crept to keep him company!
Aha, you know your betters! Then, you’ll take
Your hand away that’s fiddling on my throat,
And please to know me likewise. Who am I?
Why, one, sir, who is lodging with a friend
Three streets off — he’s a certain . . . how d’ye call?
Master — a . . . Cosimo of the Medici,
I’ the house that caps the corner. Boh! you were best!
Remember and tell me, the day you’re hanged,
How you affected such a gullet’s-gripe!
But you, sir, it concerns you that your knaves
Pick up a manner nor discredit you:
Zooks, are we pilchards, that they sweep the streets
And count fair prize what comes into their net?
He’s Judas to a tittle, that man is!
Just such a face! Why, sir, you make amends.
Lord, I’m not angry! Bid your hangdogs go
Drink out this quarter-florin to the health
Of the munificent House that harbors me
(And many more beside, lads! more beside!)
And all’s come square again. I’d like his face —
His, elbowing on his comrade in the door
With the pike and lantern — for the slave that holds
John Baptist’s head a-dangle by the hair
With one hand (“Look you, now,” as who should say)
And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!
It’s not your chance to have a bit of chalk,
A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!
Yes, I’m the painter, since you style me so.
What, brother Lippo’s doings, up and down,

You know them and they take you? like enough!
I saw the proper twinkle in your eye —
‘Tell you, I liked your looks at very first.
Let’s sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.
Here’s spring come, and the nights one makes up bands
To roam the town and sing out carnival,
And I’ve been three weeks shut within my mew,
A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
And saints again. I could not paint all night —
Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air.50
There came a hurry of feet and little feet,
A sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whifts of song —
Flower o’ the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!
Flower o’ the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good is life since?
Flower o’ the thyme> — and so on. Round they went.
Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter
Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight— three slim shapes,
And a face that looked up . . zooks, sir, flesh and blood,
That’s all I’m made of! Into shreds it went,61
Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,
All the bed-furniture — a dozen knots,
There was a ladder! Down I let myself,
Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped,
And after them. I came up with the fun
Hard by Saint Laurence, hail fellow, well met —
And so as I was stealing back again70
To get to bed and have a bit of sleep
Ere I rise up to-morrow and go work
On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast
With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,
You snap me of the sudden. Ah, I see!
Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head —
Mine’s shaved— a monk, you say — the sting’s in that!
If Master Cosimo announced himself,
Mum’s the word naturally; but a monk!
Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now! 80
I was a baby when my mother died
And father died and left me in the street.
I starved there. God knows how, a year or two
On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,
Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
My stomach being empty as your hat,
The wind doubled me up and down I went.
Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
(Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
And so along the wall, over the bridge, 90
By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,
While I stood munching my first bread that month:
“So, boy, you’re minded,” quoth the good fat father
Wiping his own mouth, ‘t was refection-time —
“T quit this very miserable world?
Will you renounce” . . . “the mouthful of bread?” thoughtI;
By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house,
Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici 100
Have given their hearts to — all at eight years old.
Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,
‘T was not for nothing — the good bellyful,
The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,
And day-long blessed idleness beside!
“Let’s see what the urchin’s fit for” — that came next,
Not overmuch their way, I must confess.
Such a to-do! They tried me with their books:
Lord, they’d have taught me Latin in pure waste!
Flower o’ the clove, 110

All the Latin I construe is, “amo” I love!>
But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets
Eight years together, as my fortune was,
Watching folk’s faces to know who will fling
The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
And who will curse or kick him for his pains,
Which gentleman processional and fine,
Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch
The droppings of the wax to sell again,
Or holla for the Eight and have him whippe
How say I? — nay, which dog bites?, which lets drop
His bone from the heap of offal in the street —
Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
He learns the look of things, and none the less
For admonition from the hunger-pinch.
I had a store of such remarks, be sure,
Which, after I found leisure, turned to use.
I drew men’s faces on my copy-books,
Scrawled them within the antiphonary’s marge,
Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,
Found eyes and nose and chin for A’s and B’s,
And made a string of pictures of the world
Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,
On the wall, the bench, the door. The monks looked black.
“Nay,” quoth the Prior, “turn him out, d’ ye say?
In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.
What if at last we get our man of parts,
We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese
And Preaching Friars, to do our church up fine
And put the front on it that ought to be!”
And hereupon he bade me daub away.
Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a blank,
Never was such prompt disemburdening.
First, every sort of monk, the black and white,
I drew them, fat and lean : then, folk at church,
From good old gossips waiting to confess
Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends —
To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
With the little children round him in a row
Of admiration, half for his beard and half
For that white anger of his victim’s son
Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
Signing himself with the other because of Christ
(Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
After the passion of a thousand years)
Till some poor girl, her apron o’er her head,
(Which the intense eyes looked through) came at eve
On tiptoe, said a word, dropped in a loaf,
Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers
(The brute took growling), prayed, and so was gone,
I painted all, then cried “‘T is ask and have;
Choose, for more’s ready!” — laid the ladder flat,
And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall.
The monks closed in a circle and praised loud
Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,
Being simple bodies — “That’s the very man!
Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!
That woman’s like the Prior’s niece who comes
To care about his asthma: it’s the life!”
But there my triumph’s straw-fire flared and funked;
Their betters took their turn to see and say:
The Prior and the learned pulled a face
And stopped all that in no time. “How? what’s here?
Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
As much as pea and pea! it’s devil’s-game!

Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,
Make them forget there’s such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men —
Man’s soul, and it’s a fire, smoke . . . no, it’s not . . .
It’s vapor done up like a new-born babe —
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
It’s . . . well, what matters talking, it’s the soul!
Give us no more of body than shows soul!
Here’s Giotto, with his Saint a-praising God,
That sets us praising — why not stop with him?
Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head
With wonder at lines, colors, and what not?
Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
Rub all out, try at it a second time.
Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
She’s just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say —
Who went and danced and got men’s heads cut off!
Have it all out! “Now, is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can’t stop there, must go further
And can’t fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white
When what you put for yellow’s simply black,
And any sort of meaning looks intense
When all beside itself means and looks naught.
Why can’t a painter lift each foot in turn,
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,
The Prior’s niece . . . patron-saint — is it so pretty
You can’t discover if it means hope, fear,
Sorrow or joy? won’t beauty go with these?
Suppose I’ve made her eyes all right and blue,
Can’t I take breath and try to add life’s flash,
And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?
Or say there’s beauty with no soul at all —
(I never saw it — put the case the same —)
If you get simple beauty and naught else,
You get about the best thing God invents:
That’s somewhat: and you’ll find the soul you have missed,
Within yourself, when you return him thanks.
“Rub all out! “Well, well, there’s my life, in short,
And so the thing has gone on ever since.
I’m grown a man no doubt, I’ve broken bounds:
You should not take a fellow eight years old
And make him swear to never kiss the girls.
I’m my own master, paint now as I please —
Having a friend, you see, in the Corner-house!
Lord, it’s fast holding by the rings in front —
Those great rings serve more purposes than just
To plant a flag in, or tie up a horse!
And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes
Are peeping o’er my shoulder as I work,
The heads shake still — “It’s art’s decline, my son!
You’re not of the true painters, great and old;
Brother Angelico’s the man, you’ll find;
Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:
Fag on at flesh, you’ll never make the third!”
I’m not the third, then: bless us, they must know!
Don’t you think they’re the likeliest to know,
They with their Latin? So, I swallow my rage,
Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint
To please them — sometimes do and sometimes don’t;
For, doing most, there’s pretty sure to come
A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints —
A laugh, a cry, the business of the world —
Flower o’ the peach,

Death for us all, and his own life for each!
And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
The world and life’s too big to pass for a dream,
And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
And play the fooleries you catch me at,
In pure rage! The old mill-horse, out at grass
After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,
Although the miller does not preach to him
The only good of grass is to make chaff.
What would men have? Do they like grass or no —
May they or may n’t they? all I want’s the thing
Settled forever one way. As it is,
You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
You don’t like what you only like too much,
You do like what, if given you at your word,
You find abundantly detestable.
For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
I always see the garden and God there
A-making man’s wife: and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can’t unlearn ten minutes afterwards,
You understand me: I’m a beast, I know.
But see, now — why, I see as certainly
As that the morning-star’s about to shine,
What will hap some day. We’ve a youngster here
Comes to our convent, studies what I do,
Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop:
His name is Guidi — he’ll not mind the monks —
They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk —
He picks my practice up — he’ll paint apace,
I hope so — though I never live so long,
I know what’s sure to follow. You be judge!
You speak no Latin more than I, belike;
However, you’re my man, you’ve seen the world
— The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises, — and God made it all!
— For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town’s face, yonder river’s line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frame to? What’s it all about?
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
Wondered at? oh, this last of course! — you say.
But why not do as well as say — paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
God’s works — paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip. Don’t object, “His works
Are here already; nature is complete:
Suppose you reproduce her (which you can’t)
There’s no advantage! you must beat her, then.”
For, don’t you mark? we’re made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted — better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,
Your cullion’s hanging face? A bit of chalk,
And trust me but you should, though! How much more,
If I drew higher things with the same truth!
That were to take the Prior’s pulpit-place,
Interpret God to all of you! Oh, oh,
It makes me mad to see what men shall do
And we in our graves! This world’s no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.
“Ay, but you don’t so instigate to prayer!”

Strikes in the Prior: “when your meaning’s plain
It does not say to folk — remember matins,
Or, mind you fast next Friday! “Why, for this
What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what’s best,
A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.
I painted a Saint Laurence six months since
At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:
“How looks my painting, now the scaffold’s down?”
I ask a brother: “Hugely,” he returns —
“Already not one phiz of your three slaves
Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,
But’s scratched and prodded to our heart’s content,
The pious people have so eased their own
With coming to say prayers there in a rage:
We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.
Expect another job this time next year,
For pity and religion grow i’ the crowd —
Your painting serves its purpose! Hang the fools!
— That is — you’ll not mistake an idle word
Spoke in a huff by a poor monk. God wot,
Tasting the air this spicy night which turns
The unaccustomed head like Chianti wine!
Oh, the church knows! don’t misreport me, now!
It’s natural a poor monk out of bounds
Should have his apt word to excuse himself:
And hearken how I plot to make amends.
I have bethought me: I shall paint a piece
. . . There’s for you! Give me six months, then go, see
Something in Sant’ Ambrogio’s! Bless the nuns!
They want a cast o’ my office. I shall paint
God in the midst. Madonna and her babe,
Ringed by a bowery flowery angel-brood,
Lilies and vestments and white faces, sweet
As puff on puff of grated orris-root
When ladies crowd to Church at midsummer.
And then i’ the front, of course a saint or two —
Saint John, because he saves the Florentines,
Saint Ambrose, who puts down in black and white
The convent’s friends and gives them a long day,
And Job, I must have him there past mistake,
The man of Uz (and Us without the z,
Painters who need his patience). Well, all these
Secured at their devotion, up shall come
Out of a corner when you least expect,
As one by a dark stair into a great light,
Music and talking, who but Lippo! I! —
Mazed, motionless and moonstruck — I’m the man!
Back I shrink — what is this I see and hear?
I, caught up with my monk’s-things by mistake,
My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,
I, in this presence, this pure company!
Where’s a hole, where’s a corner for escape?
Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing
Forward, puts out a soft palm — “Not so fast!”
— Addresses the celestial presence, “nay —
He made you and devised you, after all,
Though he’s none of you! Could Saint John there draw—
His camel-hair make up a painting-brush?
We come to brother Lippo for all that,
“*Iste perfecit opus*.” So, all smile —
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face
Under the cover of a hundred wings
Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you’re gay
And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops
The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
To some safe bench behind, not letting go

The palm of her, the little lily thing
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say.
And so all's saved for me, and for the church
A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!
Your hand, sir, and good-bye: no lights, no lights!
The street's hushed, and I know my own way back,
Don't fear me! There's the gray beginning. Zooks!

5.4.2 Reading the Poem

Before you start reading the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi", it is important for you to have some idea about the context of the poem. This poem is based on the life of Fra Filipo di Tommaso Lippi (1406-69), an eminent painter of the 15th century Italy, who had a major influence in the moulding of intellectual and aesthetic environment in the early Renaissance Italy. Fra Lippo Lippi was one of the early painters to break away from the conventional forms of ecclesiastical painting practiced by the masters like Lorenzo Monaco and Fra Angelico. You should note that the Italian Renaissance is a period of great cultural change and achievement that began in Italy around the end of the 13th century and lasted until the 16th century. It was the earliest manifestation of the general European Renaissance that marked a transition between Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Although the origins of the movement is confined largely to the literate culture of intellectual endeavour and patronage in the earlier part of the 14th century, many aspects of Italian culture and society remained largely Medieval at that time.

In "Fra Lippo Lippi", Browning uses the historical figure in order to compare the writers and artists of his time with the artist of the 15th century. "Fra Lippo Lippi" is one of the many poems where Browning seeks to examine the condition of contemporary poetry and art. The poem starts with Lippi addressing the civil guards who have arrested the painter-monk in a drunken state in the dead of night on his way home after visiting one of his mistresses. The poem constitutes of Lippi's monologue. Lippi, while justifying his unsaintly behaviour, bursts out his discontentment against the prevalent conventions of arts and aesthetics and pours forth a spirited

explanation of his views. The guards, who have found the monk loitering in his neighbourhood ‘at an alley’s end/Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar’, are necessarily surprised at this unexpected disposition of a friar. Lippi introduces himself as the artist who is patronized by Cosimo de Medici, an influential political leader of Florence and a great patron of art in his time. As the guards recognise the artist, their attitude gradually changes and Lippi comes to ease and starts his conversation with the guards. However, by the very nature of a dramatic monologue, what you will get of the conversation is only the dialogues of Lippi. It is only from Lippi’s dialogues that you will gather your ideas of the speeches made by the other characters.

Lippi asserts that, despite his social identity as a monk, he prefers to indulge in the life of sensuality: “…flesh and blood, That’s all I’m made of!” He does not want to deprive his body of the pleasures it demands; so when he saw some people enjoying themselves in the carnival night, he stole himself from his work and participated in the merrymaking when the guards caught sight of him. Now Lippi opens up the story of his life–how he has become a monk not by his choice but by circumstances. Lippi lost his parents when he was a baby; he somehow survived on the streets for one or two years when somebody took him to the monastery. For the starving boy, the food and shelter that the church offered was the only source of life. Therefore, for the sake of his daily bread, he renounced the life of sensuality at the age of eight years.

> “So, boy, you’re minded,” quoth the good fat father
> Wiping his own mouth, ‘t was refection-time —
> “To quit this very miserable world?
> Will you renounce” . . . “the mouthful of bread?” thought I;
> By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
> I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
> Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house,
> Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici

Have given their hearts to — all at eight years old."

(Lines 93-101)

Lippi so emphatically tries to justify his transgressive sexuality:

"You should not take a fellow eight years old
And make him swear never to kiss the girls"

(**Lines** 224-225)

At the monastery, the friars tried to teach him Latin, but it proved to be a useless project. He found no interest in the learning of Latin and the comprehending the abstract ideas that literature in Latin referred to. His life as a street urchin has sharpened his senses and his knowledge of life; as such, the physical world around him seemed more appealing for him. The faces of people on the streets, the animals, the shapes and colour of things have taught him to find meanings in the earthly objects and to think beyond what is visible.

Lippi gradually turns his discussions on to his experiences and reflections over his practice of painting. From his childhood, he developed the skills of drawing figures familiar to him and later started drawing the figures of people around him. The poem thematically centres round the discussion of art that Lippi starts here. The figures that he painted impress the people in his community. Everyone is pleasingly amazed at his talent; and this show of talent gains him a higher place at the monastery. However, his tendency to depict reality as it visibly is comes into conflict with the stated religious goals of the Church. The subjects of Lippi's paintings were drawn from the life he had seen and experienced. The friars fear that their parishioners may be distracted by witnessing people they know depicted within the painting. Therefore, the Prior reminds Lippi:

"Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!
Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,

Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men." (**Lines** 175-183)

The conflict between Lippi and the Prior echoes a few primary debates about the nature and purpose of art: is the primary purpose art—and, here, Lippi's art—to instruct, or to delight. If it is to instruct, is it better to provide men with ordinary scenes to which they can relate, or to offer them celestial visions to which they can aspire? Lippi vigorously rejects what the Prior claims to be the desired nature of art. While the friars plead him to renounce sensuality in his arts, he indulges himself deeply in depicting sensuous bodies in his paintings. Lippi portrays Prior's niece, who is actually Lippi's mistress, as the seductive Salome. In fact, as Lippi tries to assert, the objections from the Church authorities come not from any real religious concern, but from a concern for their own reputation. Lippi has appeared too close to the truthful depiction of the actual characters of persons around him.

Browning, through this debate between the Prior and Lippi, tries to reinforce the irony implicated in the gap between appearance and reality. The recurrent reference to the niece of the Prior serves Browning as a key structural element on this purpose. The niece first appears in the poem when the monks, marvelling over Lippi's ability to draw lifelike figures, notice a figure like her, "That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes/To care about his asthma: the life!" (170-171) The Prior vigorously rejects his paintings and advises him to concentrate on the soul of men:

"Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
Rub all out, try at it a second time.
Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
She's just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say —
Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!
Have it all out! "Now, is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further." (**Lines** 193-198)

The diction and punctuation of this passage shows some

amount of change of tone, as dramatised by Lippi, descriptive of the Prior's reaction to the discovery of his niece in the painting. He is annoyed at seeing his niece in such a sensuous disposition in the painting, whereas Lippi maintains that the beautiful creations of God, like the niece, should be given due respect in artistic creations, which will further open the doors for understanding the grandeur of soul. "If you get simple beauty and not else, / You get about the best thing that God invents:" (217-218)



LET US KNOW

The dramatic monologue that you are reading here tries to reconstruct the ethos of the Renaissance through the worldviews of a painter. Inspired by Vasari's *Lives*, Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi comes out as a complete embodiment of the Renaissance spirit. He is a bohemian artist who takes pleasure in depicting the sensuous and beautiful objects around him in his painting – an act that he perceives as the interpretations of the works of God for men. Contrasting sharply with the medieval outlook towards art, he holds that the portrayal of human forms and bodies is a superior path leading to God than the mere portrayal of the soul.

Every appearance of the Prior's niece heightens the implicit irony of the gap between appearance and reality to a newer level. The significance of the niece in the poem is not fully revealed until, in his final mention of her, Lippi hints at an illicit relationship where she is involved:

> "The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
> To some safe bench behind, not letting go
> The palm of her, the little lily thing
> That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
> Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say
> And so all's saved for me, and for the church
> A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!"

(**Lines** 383-387)

This is an outrageous passage, which is one of the most Chaucerian things that Browning ever wrote. The prior’s niece is representative of both sensual and earthily beauty which is intricately combined with illicit love. She exposes the blindness of the Prior in who fails to appreciate the place of beauty in art. Her portrayal by Lippo ridicules the Prior and the monastic order by hinting at their hypocrisy and pretensions in life.

Browning’s Lippi comes out as a confusing, ambiguous and deceptive character. He is a heretic who blasphemes and visits brothels and a devout and serious artist who believes that all good art has a religious purpose. He believes that a painter should paint “God’s works”, and to overlook even the minutest truth of nature is a “crime” (295). Departing radically from many of his contemporary artists and teachers, Lippi refuses to follow the monastic ideal of painting. He does not think of ignoring the body, or what others think the “perishable clay”, in order to get to the souls of his subjects (180). Radically enough, Lippi believes that a painter can best represent the soul by concentrating on the body in its utmost detail: “the value and significance of flesh I can’t unlearn”.

Lippi has no aspirations beyond simple mimesis of the world as he understands, while the Prior has no respect for the importance of the ordinary objects of life. Lippi believes that meaning is always private and it can be derived only from the mundane. With this argument, he can easily disarm the worldly-wise guards like the Prior by rationalizing away moral scruples and averting a sexual dilemma. With sexually suggestive archetypes and rhetorical ploys, Lippi manipulates the unreconciled sensual and ethical concerns. While he “interprets God” (311), he creates Him in his own image, blurring distinctions between conscience and convenience. Radically enough, he reads Scriptural lessons to fit sexual inferences: The monk parodies the Prior’s ridiculous hypocrisy in the very language of his opponent’s windy and dogmatic manner:

“You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
You don’t like what you only like too much,

You do like what, if given you at your word,
You find abundantly detestable.
For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
I always see the garden and God there
A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards." (Lines 261-269)

This sharp satire immediately followed by the deeply felt solemn pronouncement "I always see the garden and God there / A-making man's wife." is the kind of truth that is perfectly accessible to and apprehended by the monk. His vision of God creating Eve rises instinctively, and releases that incorruptible and childlike impulse to glorify God and His creation. Lippi is presented as one of the most genuinely religious sensualists who ever found a place in English literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State the context in which Browning has set his poem "Fra Lippo Lippi."

Q 2: What is the contradiction Lippi is facing because of his identity?

Q 3: In what ways, does Lippi's primary skill face with challenges after his becoming a monk?

Q 4: How does Browning expose and criticise the pseudo-sainthood of the Prior?

Q 5: What impact of Renaissance Humanism do you find on the character of Lippo?

Q 6: Write briefly about the distinguishing features between Medieval and Renaissance art.

14.3.2 Major Themes

Although the poem revolves around the single most dominant theme of an individual's reaction against certain set conventions of

the society, we may also think of the following points as major themes in the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Renaissance Arts and Paintings:

“Fra Lippo Lippi” is one of the poems that display Browning’s abiding interest in the Renaissance civilization. The speaker Fillippo Lippi is a Florentine painter and monk. He is on the pavement outside the Medici-Riccardi palace. He is paining an altarpiece for Cosimo Medici and by referring to the characters of the Carmine and San Lorenzo, the poem shows its background of the Renaissance Italy. Most of the material for the poem comes from the account of Fillippo Lippi in Giorgio Vasari’s book *Live of the Painters*.

With the story of a painter’s life, the poet tries to express his own philosophy of art and aesthetics. The poem chiefly demarcates the conflict between Medieval and Renaissance viewpoints on arts and the role of the artist. The early days of Renaissance art saw a gradual shift from the ecclesiastical order to a secular worldview. The first art of Renaissance retained a great deal of faith and superstition, the philosophy, theology of the middle ages. The Medieval painting gave themselves chiefly to the representation of the soul upon the face, and the inspired human body under the influence of religious passion. At this time, painting dedicated its works to the representation of the heavenly life, either on earth in the stories of the gospels and in the lives of the saints, or in the circles of heaven. The expression of secular passion on the face, figures encaged in their social life and war and trade, were never regarded as worthy of representation. Gradually, in harmony with the changes in social and literary life, the art of Renaissance took a turn from the representation of the soul to the representation of the body, with all its beauty and vigour, engaged in its natural movements. This type of painting shows an acute blending of the reality and symbolism. The poem thus tries to reconstruct a particular historical ethos prevalent in the socio-cultural life of Renaissance Italy.

Art and Morality:

The poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" raises several important questions regarding the role of art in society and its connection with morality. As you look at the history of literature and art, you will find that the question of morality in connection with artistic representations has always been a site for never ending debates among thinkers. You will find reference to these debates in classical Greek texts like Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. Through Lippi's life and paintings, Browning tries to raise the same question again. Fra Lippo Lippi's life as a painter and his painting would violate all the established norms of the relationship between art and morality. Making a sharp contrast to the medieval attitude of looking at art as a means to the realisation of God, Lippi paintings aim at gratifying the beauty of the mundane and phenomenal world with all its sensuousness. Instead of drawing 'inspired' faces, the characters in his paintings show secular expressions caught in their social lives. Instead of aiming at religious preaching and reflecting the soul, his paintings try to focus on gratifying the beauty of the naked human bodies. Browning shows Fra Lippo as a realist who deviated from the religious idealism of the earlier painters. The Church authorities criticized his paintings because they did not express religious feelings.

The Question of Realism:

Browning, through the characterisation of Lippi, tries to give vent to the concern for Realism. Throughout the poem, Browning is constantly making the monk, almost poignantly, attempting to represent the everyday and mundane phenomena expressed in: "A laugh, a cry, the business of the world," "this fair town's face.../The mountain round it and the sky above". This tendency has indissolubly linked Victorian poetry with that conception of the world, which was called Realism in the Middle Ages. In this sense, Lippi is instinctively and essentially a "realist." He looks for a "meaning" behind the "world" ("To find its meaning is my meat and drink"). By defining everything as the creations of God ("God made it all!"), Lippi tries to attribute

the highest value to the objects he perceives around him. Lippo defends his realism by declaring that one way of worshipping God is to take pleasure in the visible world, which God has created. Whereas, Lippo is orthodox in his theology, the austere Prior, with his pretensions to sainthood, stands convicted of a radical perversion of the realist philosophy. In order to discharge their pious 'rage' the Prior and his disciples have 'scratched and prodded' Lippi's painting of the human forms. Their holy concepts have hardened into mere externalisms and they fail to find out the hidden meanings of the world. Because their 'simplistic' theology is rooted in a defective formalism, it is not, ironically, the ascetic Prior or his followers but the high-spirited 'realist,' Lippi, who is able to discover the religious meanings.

Human Nature and Significance of the Flesh:

The transitional phase between Medieval and Renaissance painting, or in other words, the beginning of Renaissance influenced Browning. This attitude is characteristic of Browning's worldview and perception to life; his keenest sympathies always lie with the young rather than the old. "Fra Lippo Lippi" is representative of this attitude adopted by the poet. With the coming of the Renaissance, 'the value and significance of flesh' received greater appreciation and the depiction of human form was held no longer an impediment to spiritual progress. Through this poem, Browning expresses his sympathy with humanism and realism of Renaissance art, its protest against the asceticism of the Middle Ages, its conviction that 'the world is too big to pass for a dream'. Through artistic recreation of the world of nature, Fra Lippo Lippi tries to pave a way to God. He is delighted to express the sensuous beauty of the world of which God is a part, the creator. This is in direct contrast to the medieval ascetic viewpoint, which holds that the artist should never try to recreate nature. To recreate nature is like trying to compete with God. However, Lippi holds that recreating is a means of interpretation; he believes that his task as a painter is to interpret the works of God for

men: "This world is no blot for us, / Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: / To find its meaning is my meat and drink."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: How does Lippi's painting mark a transition from Medieval to Renaissance painting?

Q 8: Can we consider Lippi to be a realist?

14.3.3 Borrowing's Poetic Style

Browning was never considered a great poet by his contemporaries because his subjects were often obscure and lay beyond the tastes and cognitions of the great bulk of his contemporary readers. His extremely condensed and rugged expression maintains subtle links between the ideas and the manner through which he expresses them in his poetry. His treatment of the themes is often difficult and obscure though the keynote of his teaching is a wise and noble optimism. Browning is one of the greatest humourists of English poetry. His peculiar style of humour gives him a unique space in English literature. His humour covers a wide range of subjects starting from plain and pure fun to laughter from extremely sarcastic and critical expressions. In "Fra Lippo Lippi", composed in blank verse, we find the simplest humour and pure laughter occasionally infused with biting wit and stinging irony. However, the very nature of the character of Lippo Lippi, as a bohemian sensualist caught, compressed but not contained in the life of a monk, has conditioned such a restless and irrepressibly comic composition of the poem. Though the story of Fra Lippo Lippi has been taken from Vasari's *Lives*, Browning's portrayal of the painter can claim complete originality. What the historical fact has served Browning is to act merely as materials for his artistic creations. Browning, with the help of his jovial tone accompanied by its heart humour and high spirits and the breathless speed of the verse has rendered the painter to the life.

The style used by Browning in this poem is that of a dramatic monologue that Browning is famous for. You are already told that this style involves a speaker and an implied auditor, and the speaker subtly conveys meaning as well as directly revealing meaning. This poem, like many of his monologues, show an intricate mingling of the colloquial and the unusual that results in an effect of grotesqueness that adds life and a kind of humour to his characters. The cadences that he employs in the poem may not be as colloquial as they seem, but the artificial and archaic nature of the expressions distanced his character (Lippo Lippi) from Browning's own time. This distancing gives an effect of an age and of individuality suggesting that this particular accent authentically belongs to the man at a particular moment of history in this place. Browning's use of double rhymes, used almost in a comic way, helped him to avail such effect.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Comment very briefly on the poetic style of Browning from the reading of the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi".



14.4 LET US SUM UP

As you have finished reading the unit, you must have developed a fair idea of the poetic world of Robert Browning and his poem "Fra Lippo Lippi". You have learnt that Browning, because of his condensed expression, mastery over wit and humour, and the ability to create sharp irony, is regarded as one of the greatest Victorian poets. The poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" provides a beautiful example of the poet's mastery over engaging in deep philosophical debates through plain and humorous expression. The poem is a dramatic monologue where the poet dramatises the tension between Medieval asceticism and Renaissance aesthetics on the idea of art. Through the portrayal of Fra Lippo Lippi as a bohemian, unsaintly, sensuous monk,

the poet creates cutting laughter in his attempt to expose and critique the hypocrisy, prejudices and pretensions of the medieval clergy. The poet celebrates Renaissance humanism and Renaissance art where, with stark contrast to the medieval attitude, importance is given on the portrayal of the body in all its beauty.



14.5 FURTHER READING

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Loucks, James F. (ed). (1979). *Robert Browning's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*. London & New York. WW Norton & Company.

Symons, Arthur. (2006). *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*. New Delhi: A.B.S. Publishers and Distributors.

Web Resources:

www.wikipaedia.org

http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/lippi/text.html



14.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: This poem is based on the life of Fra Filipo di Tommaso Lippi (1406-69), an eminent painter of the 15th century Italy, who had a major influence in the moulding of intellectual and aesthetic environment in the early Renaissance Italy… …Lippi showed the courage to break away from the conventional forms of ecclesiastical painting practised by the masters like Lorenzo Monaco and Fra Angelico.

Ans to Q No 2: Lippi's contradiction was that despite his social identity as a monk, he prefers to indulge in the life of sensuality: "…flesh and blood, That's all I'm made of!" He did not want to deprive his body of the pleasures it demands. So when he saw some people enjoying themselves in the carnival night, he stole himself from his work and participated in the merrymaking when the guards caught sight of him.

Ans to Q No 3: From his childhood, he developed the skills of drawing human figures… …Lippi's show of this talent gains him a higher place at the monastery… …but his tendency to depict reality as it visibly is comes into conflict with the stated religious goals of the Church… …the friars feared that their parishioners may be distracted by witnessing the people they know depicted within the painting.

Ans to Q No 4: Lippi's paintings of human figures… …the Prior's reactions… …portrayal of the Prior's niece in all her sensuality… …hint at a possible adultery… …the Prior's reaction at the discovery of his niece on the painting… …exposes the hypocrisy of the Prior.

Ans to Q No 5: Lippi's emphasis on the body rather than on the soul… …critique of medieval scholasticism… …ridiculing the Prior, his niece and the life of a monk… …depicting people and experience from his day to day life.

Ans to Q No 6: Medieval asceticism vs. Renaissance humanism… …the soul vs. the body… …question of beauty, nature… …role of art and aesthetics.

Ans to Q No 7: Depiction of men in their social life, war and trade… …secular expression on faces… …emphasis on the beauty and sensuality of the body… …the Prior's niece.

Ans to Q No 8: Representation of men in their social life… … importance on everyday and mundane phenomena… …looking for 'meaning' behind the 'world'… …drawing of objects around him… …rejection of overt spiritualism and asceticism… …treatment of men as bodied beings with all desires of the flesh.

Ans to Q No 9: Condensed and rugged expression… …use of cutting humour and sharp irony… …character portrayal conditioning his mode of expression… …lyric sensibility.



14.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Do you think that Browning is successful in reflecting the ironic contemplation and intensity of feeling through his dramatic monologues? Discuss with reference to the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Q 2: Discuss “Fra Lippo Lippi” as a treatise on the Renaissance art and worldview in contrast with the medieval attitude towards art.

Q 3: It is often said that Browning’s dramatic monologues reflect the psychology of the characters he portrays. How are the inner-conflicts of characters reflected in his monologues?

Q 4: Discuss how Browning sympathises with the aesthetics and the philosophy of Renaissance art in the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Q 5: Write your views on Browning’s handling of poetic style and characterisation as he dramatizes the conflict between medieval asceticism and Renaissance worldview in the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Q 6: Write a note on the importance of the painting of Prior’s niece in the thematic development of the poem.

Q 7: Attempt an analysis of the character of Friar Lippo in the light of the inner conflicts that he is undergoing.

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